



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

CHARACTER AND PLOT IN THE *ANTIGONE*

BY NORMAN W. DEWITT
Victoria College, Toronto

The *Antigone* is almost unique among ancient plays in its power to engage the interest of the modern reader. At most times we are able to lend but a learned sympathy to the peculiar morality of the Greek mind that forms the background of the classical drama, but in this instance it so happens that the curious necessity of ceremonial burial, which by itself is a bit of sheer paganism, gives rise to a conflict between the rights of the private conscience and the duty of obedience to the law which meets with ready apprehension and quick sympathy in the heart of the modern man, where the wounds of old persecutions have left an area of great sensitiveness.

It will readily be admitted that moral issues are uppermost in the minds of the descendants of pious generations, even if the vitality of religious experience has somewhat waned, and that the matter of artistic form is prone to be overlooked in the presence of the beauty of holiness. We involuntarily take *Antigone* to our hearts, because we are born of a race that for ages has regarded martyrs with honor and veneration, and *Antigone* is manifestly a martyr. She resolves upon her course of action with deliberate coolness, anticipating the consequences without thought of avoiding them by entreaty, concealment, or flight. While not unconscious of the pleasures she has chosen to forego, she views her death as a triumph, regarding herself as a second Niobe and looking forward to a happy reunion with father, mother, and brothers. To her imagination the dismal Hades of her people glows with the brightness of the Christian heaven, and she becomes quite comparable to the martyr of the primitive church who went serenely to her doom, unshaken in her confidence that she had chosen the better part.

The moral bias of the modern mind, however, is precisely that factor in our judgment against which we must be most vigilantly on our guard. A martyr cannot be the real hero of a tragedy. A

fate that is self-chosen cannot take the place of a doom that comes as the vengeance of the gods upon the astonished and humiliated prince who unwittingly has run foul of eternal law. Nor is the self-exaltation of the martyr consistent with the collapse of the tragic hero's pride and the headlong descent of his fortunes from good to bad and from bad to worse. It is true that the emotions evoked by the spectacle of martyrdom seem all but identical with the pity and terror of the tragic catastrophe, but they really differ intrinsically in their natures and effects. The former, inspiring us with feelings of tumultuous protest against the cruelty and injustice of this world, works a disquieting and painful influence upon our souls, while the not unmerited humiliation of the tragic victim, on the other hand, exercises a chastening power and reconciles us with the operation of a divine justice that works itself out upon this earth and not in the life to come. For it must not escape our attention that tragedy is a form of pagan art and presumes that the accounts of good and evil will be squared on this side of the great divide.

It is Creon who is technically the hero of the play. Ignoring the ties of kindred, rejecting all advice, deaf to entreaties, and indifferent to the rights of human affection, he stubbornly proceeds upon the way of his own determination. Not until all mortal remonstrance has been spent and the prophet of the gods has been reviled does his secretly wavering resolution suddenly give way, and then it is too late. Mischief is already afoot and outstrips him. The fates have taken events into their own hands and sweep him onward with overwhelming swiftness to the reward that is prepared to be the portion of those who despise the counsels of wisdom and follow the dictates of despotic pride. It is his career, and not Antigone's, that enforces the lesson of tragedy. He falls from his high estate, unloved but not unpitied, a human being like ourselves, suffering in this life for mistakes committed in this life. It is idle to ask ourselves in this connection whether Antigone, too, was not in the wrong. Since she remained convinced of the righteousness of her conduct and confidently expected a reward beyond the grave in the approval of the gods and the satisfaction of her kindred, she cannot point the moral of the tragedy. She is a heroine, but not the hero.

The fact remains, of course, that her rôle is the most conspicuous and the most fascinating. Such an anomaly is not astonishing in itself and has been made familiar to students by the example of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, of which the real hero, if we diligently analyze the plot, is found to be Brutus. Caesar, like Antigone, was sanctified in the imagination of the public for whom the poet was writing, and the prudent writer of plays will not lightly slight the idols of popular sentiment. None know better than the poets that history and legend, shaped by necessity and chance, fall but rarely into forms that are immediately available for artistic use, but the great poets have never held to the doctrine of art for art's sake, and, intent upon the prize of the moment, whether it be the glory of victory or the coin of the country, readily consent to the pious deception of misnaming a play, making the part seem to be greater than the whole. Hence it is that the audience is harmlessly deluded into believing that it has witnessed the performance of an *Antigone* or a *Julius Caesar*, while all the time it has been watching a Creon or a Brutus preparing his own doom.

Bearing in mind the necessity of anomalous treatment, it is instructive to observe with what care the poet apportions dramatic emphasis between the rôles of the hero and the heroine. To allow undue prominence to the part of Antigone would have been only too easy. The legend itself leaned in this direction, and nothing more was required than a chorus of Theban maidens to make the interest of the play genuinely romantic and pathetic. But romance and pathos were alien to the best traditions of tragedy, and so we find the erotic motive only as a haunting accompaniment of the principal theme. As a piece of literary art it is better for the proud and beautiful daughter of the Labdacids to stand alone, a figure spiritually solitary, inaccessible to the tearful affection of her sister and the self-sacrificing devotion of her lover. As for Creon's part, the poet cannot afford to elevate it above the level of the tyrant as traditionally conceived. He is drawn to a conventional standard and very fittingly meets with the support of the conservative old men of the state. Even if it is in his career that the true lesson of tragedy must be enforced, yet it is impossible, on account of the surpassing interest of Antigone's part, to exalt him to any such level

as Oedipus in the *Oedipus Rex*, in whose person the interest of character and the interest of the plot are concentrated.

A striking analogy exists between the task of the classical dramatist and that of the sculptor who essays to arrange a group in the triangular space of a temple pediment. The central position must be given to a single figure larger and more imposing than the others, which diminish alike in stature and importance on either side, with such an effortless harmony between form and space that one is more inclined to assert that a triangle has been drawn around the group than to say that the group has been adapted to the triangle. The *Oedipus Rex* exhibits this marvelous harmony, all the characters being subordinated to the king and all the action starting from his initiative. In the *Antigone* it is not so. The central position belongs by canons of art to Creon, but legend and tradition, that is, the people, demand that it be given to the heroine, and the poet submits. What is the effect of this upon the structure of the play? The answer is easy to state in terms of Aristotle's *Poetics*, where we read that the plot is the chief thing, the soul of tragedy, while character is secondary. Now in the *Antigone* we find the emphasis reversed, and the heroine, who stands for character, crowds Creon, who stands for the plot, out of the central position in the pediment. In this play, therefore, the plot is not the chief thing.

It is likely that Aristotle would have given it a relatively low place, and certainly it stands well below the *Oedipus* in technical perfection, but it is all the more apprehensible to us and more enjoyable. Our feelings are engaged more quickly than our judgment, and the beauty of holiness renders us forgetful of the function of form. In our attitude toward art and life, a Matthew Arnold might say, we are rather Hebraic than Hellenic.